

# **Enhancing Family Functioning**

## **Individual Attention for Each Child**

As important as it is to have family meetings and spend time as a family, families also benefit when parents give each child individualized attention. The following guidelines outline how giving each child attention can benefit the whole family as well as how the time can be structured to maximize potential rewards.

### **SPECIAL TIME**

Making time for children is one of the most important things a parent can do. Children want to spend time with their parents, yet parents often find it difficult to find time for their children. Even when parents interact with their children, the parents often determine the time, the amount of time, and the activity, which detracts from the value of the interaction. Special time is one way to fill the deep, constant needs of parents and children for attention and encouragement.

Special time is for one child and one parent. The child chooses the parent, and the other parent and children make other arrangements. Parents with two or more children may have to alternate them so each has time alone with that parent.

Special time is a pre-arranged, guaranteed, and uninterrupted time that the parent spends with a child, a period of time in which the two interact without the parent being judgmental or directive. The family decides how often to have special time: daily is ideal. It is a time of day in which the parent is unconditionally available to the child. It is a commitment to the child and demonstrates by action that the child is valued and loved. Special time is suitable for preschoolers, school age children, and adolescents.

### **Purposes of Special Time**

- It offers children the opportunity to have some input and control over special time, which makes them feel competent and respected. It defuses a power struggle between parents and children by giving them decision making power and the accompanying self-respect. During special time, the parent might say, "You're in charge. You pick the activity and I will join you."
- By participating, the parent acknowledges the child's rights, capabilities and needs.
- Special time can eliminate conflicts. If a child is pestering the parent to play a game, the parent can respond that he is doing something else, but "We can play the game during special time."
- Special time allows parents to observe children up close and focus exclusively on them. The parent learns much about the child and has many opportunities to praise, encourage, and express affection.
- Special time helps parents alleviate their guilt over not spending enough time with their children.

Special time provides a form of "time in" for parents and children, an opportunity to spend time with each other, which builds a sense of trust and commitment. It provides predictable, regular, and protected time for the child and parent.

## **Implementing Special Time**

- The parent should suggest the notion of special time at a pleasant or neutral time and simply ask the child if he/she would be interested in spending time together on a regular basis.
- The parent and child select a mutually convenient time of day. This can vary from weekday to weekend.
- The child chooses the activity so long as the activity is within the limits of parental time and financial resources, and does not violate the dignity or the authority of the parent. Parents may offer younger children a choice of activities. Suggested activities include reading a story, playing a board game, telling bedtime stories, playing a sport, fixing a broken toy or bike, and going out for a meal. Sharing a musical or artistic activity, going to a museum or library, and cooking a meal are other types of special time. Older children and adolescents may prefer to go shopping, practice driving the car, or carry out an activity over several sessions, e.g., a time-consuming board game or chess game.
- One of the best opportunities to talk is when parent and child take car rides, when they are away from the distractions and interruptions of the home.
- Generally interactive activities are preferable, but occasionally a passive activity (TV viewing) is okay and sometimes even preferable.
- The parent and child should both decide how much time to spend together, but this should be based on the parent's ability to keep the commitment. It is better to start with short periods of time to avoid fatigue and boredom, e.g., 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the child's age. Once a schedule has been established, the parent can post it on the refrigerator or in several places (in the bedrooms, bathrooms). When starting special time, it is easy to forget or cancel it.
- Parents should work hard to keep their promise of special time.
- If special time needs to be rescheduled, the parent and child need to do it together in a democratic manner.

## **Guidelines for Special Time**

- Special time should be called by any name the child chooses, e.g., "Fun time."
- Special time is given to each child as scheduled regardless of behavior or mood. It is given unconditionally.
- If a child is disruptive or uncooperative during special time, the parent has the option to cancel it or suspend it temporarily until the child settles down. The parent might want to put the child in Time Out for a brief period or impose another consequence. The parent decides if the disciplinary action is part of the allotted time or is separate.
- Special time is not "saved up" and used to extend the time of the next special time. Each special time is for a pre-determined amount of time, but sometimes the parent and child may both agree to extend a particular session to finish an activity.
- Special time should be without interruption of any kind, except true emergencies.

Coleman, W.L. (2001). *Family-Focused Behavioral Pediatrics*. Lippencott Williams & Wilkins, NY.